

International Perspectives on the Career Development of Young University Faculty

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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of increasingly intense global competition in higher education, young university faculty, as the future backbone of the academic community, have seen the quality of their career development become a critical factor determining the core competitiveness of universities. Compared to the prevalent challenges of "involution", time anxiety, and "up-or-out" pressure faced by young faculty in China, developed countries represented by the United States, Germany, and Japan have established relatively mature and distinctive support systems for young faculty's career development. Building upon a review of domestic relevant research, this paper systematically analyzes the core concepts and practical experiences of typical foreign models in institutional design, cultural cultivation, and pathway support. The study finds that their common strength lies in providing young faculty with clear developmental pathways and sustained momentum from post-recruitment adaptation to independent academic growth through structural institutional reforms, systematic professional support, refined career guidance, and the cultivation of academic community culture. These experiences offer valuable insights for China to address the practical predicament of young faculty development and construct a localized support ecosystem characterized by greater humanistic care, academic rationality, and sustainability.

Keywords: *Universities, Young faculty, Career development.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Currently, the career development of young university faculty in China is confronted with a pervasive collective challenge. On one hand, there is the high-intensity survival pressure and professional identity anxiety brought by the "up-or-out" pre-tenure system (Shen Dong, 2023; Tian Xianpeng & Jiang Shujie, 2022); on the other hand, there is the prevalent issue of "time poverty" and "young faculty anxiety" stemming from the multiple role burdens of teaching, research, and institutional service (Li Yuqian, 2023, 2025). This pressure not only gives rise to an alienated labor perception of being "academic migrant workers" (Luo Liang et al., 2023) but also constrains the space for in-depth academic reflection, teaching innovation, and the integration of teaching and research (Gu Murong et al., 2023; Zhou Haitao & Yu Rong, 2022). Numerous studies indicate that young faculty are deeply entrenched in "involutionary" competition, with their developmental motivation shifting from intrinsic

academic interests to the pursuit of external performance metrics, thereby facing risks of role deviation and professional burnout (Wang Yuling, 2024; Zhu Xiaowen, 2022; Yao Yixia & Zhang Wenshun, 2021). In this context, relying solely on individual resilience is insufficient to address systemic pressures; structural breakthroughs at the institutional and cultural levels are urgently required. In contrast, while developed countries in higher education also face competitive challenges, they have established support systems aimed at fostering healthy and sustainable academic career development through long-term exploration, providing valuable alternative perspectives and reform ideas for China.

2. PARADIGM SHIFT FROM "INSTRUMENTAL RATIONALITY" TO "DEVELOPMENTAL RATIONALITY"

The support for young faculty's career development in developed countries is first reflected in a profound philosophical shift from viewing young faculty as "instruments" for achieving organizational performance to investing in and nurturing them as "subjects" of sustainable academic development. This "developmental rationality" paradigm emphasizes the long-term nature, growth potential, and humanistic dimensions of career development.

For instance, in recent years, despite facing pressures from declining birthrates and fiscal constraints, Japan has sought to balance workforce mobility and career stability through revisions to the "Law Concerning Fixed-Term Employment of University Faculty" and the "Academic Promotion" system. Its core philosophy emphasizes supporting young researchers' early academic independence and long-term potential development (Zhang Lingyun & Dou Jiaqi, 2025). Germany is renowned for its "Junior Professor" system, which aims to break the lengthy and dependent nature of the traditional "Habilitation" system by offering time-limited yet independent research positions, startup funding, and graduate supervision qualifications. This enables outstanding doctoral graduates to embark on independent academic careers at an early stage, with its core rooted in "trust" and "empowerment". American universities generally adhere to the philosophy that "faculty development equates to student success", viewing support for young faculty's professional growth as the cornerstone of enhancing university educational quality; consequently, their support systems are highly professionalized and institutionalized. This fundamental philosophical difference leads to systematic divergences in institutional design, resource allocation, and cultural atmosphere.

3. SUPPORT SYSTEMS WITH CLEAR STRUCTURE AND DIVERSE PATHWAYS

Sound institutional frameworks are the cornerstone for translating philosophical principles into practice. International experience demonstrates that clear, stable, and flexible institutional

arrangements are key to alleviating young faculty's uncertainty and anxiety.

In terms of career entry and promotion pathways, Germany's "Junior Professor" system and America's "tenure-track" system, despite their rigorous evaluation processes, both provide selected young faculty with a primary career pathway featuring clear objectives, matched resources, and a transparent timeline. In contrast to the significant uncertainty and "short-termism" behaviors that may arise from China's "up-or-out" system, these international systems, while challenging, operate with relatively transparent rules and typically offer "startup support" upon employment—such as research initiation funds and reduced teaching loads—to facilitate their academic transition. Japan, through the classified management of "fixed-term faculty" and "tenured faculty," coupled with talent programs like "Special Postdoctoral Researchers" (PD), has constructed diversified and interconnected career channels, striving to balance competitive incentives with career security (Zhang Lingyun & Dou Jiaqi, 2025).

Regarding professional development support systems, American universities generally establish robust "Centers for Teaching and Learning" or "Faculty Development Centers." These centers provide new faculty with comprehensive workshops, one-on-one consultations, and peer evaluations covering instructional design, educational technology, classroom management, and student assessment—with support spanning the entire career cycle. This support is not remedial but developmental, aimed at continuously enhancing faculty's teaching-as-scholarship capabilities. Many universities also feature "Writing Centers" specifically designed to assist faculty in overcoming writing challenges related to academic publications and research grant applications. This approach of professionalizing and institutionalizing support services effectively supplements the limitations of single-discipline mentors in guiding general career competencies.

In constructing long-term support mechanisms for young university faculty, evaluation and incentive systems play a fundamental guiding role. While research output remains a significant criterion, many foreign universities explicitly incorporate teaching effectiveness, social service, and contributions to the academic community as key considerations in tenure reviews. Notably, there is growing recognition of the "Scholarship of Teaching and Learning"—encouraging faculty to

treat teaching practice as a rigorous scholarly endeavor, with research findings valued equally to traditional academic publications. This provides differentiated development space for teaching-oriented faculty and alleviates the singular pressure of "publication-centric" evaluation metrics. Additionally, establishing special research funds, teaching innovation awards, and early-career achievement awards specifically for young faculty not only provides critical resources but also serves as important recognition of their professional identity and contributions.

4. BUILDING ACADEMIC COMMUNITY AND OPTIMIZING TIME CULTURE

Beyond institutional frameworks, a healthy academic culture is essential for nurturing young faculty's growth. Foreign universities generally emphasize the construction of academic communities to address the inherent loneliness and potential isolation of academic careers.

A deeply rooted mentoring culture is pivotal in this regard. This entails not only formal institutional "mentorship programs" but also a profound cultural consensus centered on academic heritage and professional development that transcends utilitarian evaluations. In addition to formal academic mentors, many universities implement "peer mentoring" or "cross-departmental mentoring" programs, providing new faculty with multi-faceted support networks. Regular departmental colloquia, interdisciplinary seminars, and social events for new faculty serve as informal exchange platforms, fostering experience sharing and interpersonal connections. This community culture not only facilitates the transfer of tacit knowledge but also provides emotional support, alleviating the isolation often experienced in early academic careers. Japanese universities emphasize the "laboratory" as the foundational unit of academic community, where mentors guide junior scholars across academic, career, and even daily life domains, forming strong and enduring academic lineages (Zhang Lingyun & Dou Jiaqi, 2025).

Facing the universal pressure of "temporal acceleration" in global academia, some foreign universities have proactively sought to optimize their "temporal culture". For example, through institutional design to protect faculty's "deep work time," reducing unnecessary meetings and administrative burdens; promoting "focused

writing" workshops to enhance research efficiency; and even explicitly prohibiting work-related emails during evenings or weekends to safeguard work-life boundaries. This institutional respect for faculty's time autonomy and physical-mental well-being helps alleviate "time anxiety" and preserves cognitive space for creative academic work—forming a stark contrast to the "time-entrapped" predicament highlighted in domestic research (Li Yuqian, 2025).

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR CHINA AND PATH CONSTRUCTION

Learning from international experience aims to promote self-improvement. The practices of developed countries provide valuable references for optimizing China's support system for young university faculty's career development. Such learning does not entail simple institutional transplantation or model replication but rather a process of creative transformation based on in-depth comparison and critical reflection.

First, there is an urgent need to shift institutional design from a "selection-oriented" logic to a "development-oriented" logic. When reforming pre-tenure systems such as "up-or-out," greater emphasis should be placed on their developmental and nurturing functions. We can explore establishing more supportive "pre-tenure teaching-research positions" equipped with adequate startup resources, clear developmental guidance, and "milestone-based" mid-term evaluations. This transforms the evaluation process into a continuous cycle of feedback, guidance, and support rather than a simplistic bottom-performer elimination mechanism. Simultaneously, diversified promotion channels should be constructed—such as "Teaching Professor" and "Applied Research Professor" tracks—enabling young faculty with different strengths and interests to envision clear career trajectories.

Accelerating the construction of professional, substantive faculty development support systems at both university and college levels is a solid guarantee for advancing young faculty's career development. Drawing on the model of American teaching centers, institutions should be established to provide comprehensive services including curriculum development, consulting, and resource coordination—offering one-stop support for young faculty in enhancing teaching capabilities, applying for research projects, academic writing, and career planning. Special attention should be paid to young

faculty's "career transition period," with systematic onboarding training and continuous follow-up support during their first three years of employment.

Efforts should be made to cultivate a supportive academic community culture, translating this concept from an abstract slogan into concrete institutional arrangements and daily practices—thereby addressing the prevalent academic isolation and competitive alienation. Institutionally, a "dual mentor system" (combining academic mentors and career mentors) should be implemented, encouraging the formation of interdisciplinary academic communities or learning groups for young faculty. Administrative departments should streamline processes, optimize meeting efficiency, and grant faculty greater time autonomy, while actively advocating for healthy, sustainable academic work rhythms. Attention should also be paid to faculty's mental health, fostering an organizational atmosphere characterized by mutual respect and collaborative win-win outcomes.

Reform of the evaluation system, as a "linchpin," occupies a critical position in university governance and young faculty's career development—with far-reaching implications for resource allocation, academic behavior, and value definition. Therefore, evaluation practices must resolutely move beyond the single quantitative assessment represented by the "Five Onlys," implementing systems focused on representative works and contribution-based evaluation. In academic title reviews and performance distribution, substantive weight should be given to teaching achievements, talent cultivation quality, and social service contributions. In particular, evaluation standards and incentive mechanisms for the "Scholarship of Teaching and Learning" should be established and improved, guiding faculty to return to their fundamental mission of educating students.

The career development challenges faced by young university faculty constitute a complex systemic issue involving institutions, culture, and resources. Addressing these challenges cannot rely solely on individual efforts but requires systemic reforms and ecological reshaping. The practical experiences of countries such as the United States, Germany, and Japan demonstrate that a virtuous academic career development ecosystem depends on top-level design rooted in "developmental rationality," relies on clear, stable, and supportive institutional arrangements, and is nurtured by a collaborative and mutually supportive academic community culture. As Chinese universities pursue

"Double First-Class" construction, they should place people-centered development—especially the growth of young faculty—at the strategic core. By learning from international experience and adaptively innovating to local contexts, we can construct a career development environment for young faculty that both stimulates innovative vitality and provides sustainable support, that embraces competitive challenges while offering abundant humanistic care. This is not only crucial for attracting and retaining outstanding young talent but also represents a long-term strategy for China's higher education to achieve connotative and sustainable development.

6. CONCLUSION

Throughout the long river of human civilization, universities have always served as a unique domain that upholds traditions and nurtures the future, and early-career faculty stand precisely at this pivotal intersection of time and space—they are both inheritors of academic heritage and explorers venturing into the unknown. By systematically analyzing the support systems for the development of early-career faculty in universities of the United States, Germany and Japan, this paper reveals a profound consensus that transcends technical dimensions: the cultivation of young scholars is, in essence, a profound reflection and practice concerning the continuity of academic civilization.

An analysis of the experience of developed countries shows that its most remarkable feature lies not in the sophistication of institutional design, but in the consistent adherence to a clear humanistic core. Whether it is the "trust and empowerment" embodied in Germany's Junior Professor system, the philosophy of "faculty development as the foundation of student success" practiced by teaching centers in the United States, or the emphasis on "fostering early independence and long-term potential" in Japan's academic promotion and development system, all these exemplify a simple truth: only when institutions regard individuals as ends rather than means, and view development as the construction of an ecological system rather than the mere accumulation of indicators, can academic innovation truly secure an inexhaustible source of vitality. This paradigm shift from "instrumental rationality" to "developmental rationality" essentially constitutes a return to the essence of universities—universities are not only places for

knowledge production, but also sanctuaries for nurturing the growth of every explorer.

The development of early-career faculty is a touchstone for the spirit of universities and a barometer of a nation's innovation capacity. It is hoped that these insights from foreign countries can inspire more localized exploration and practice, enabling Chinese universities to truly become a spiritual home where early-career faculty can pursue their academic ideals and realize their life values.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independent completed by Professor Tian Junjie.

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